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The Role of Humor in Protest Culture

Marjolein 't Hart

General Definition of the Term and Cultural Functions

Humor belongs to the rich instruments of communication and can be used as such in social protest. Puns, punch lines, and jokes can articulate discontent; cartoons can visualize injustice. Thanks to the jesting packing, they express these views in an attractive way. Another advantage is that humor tends to disarm the opponent, as to react in a serious way to a joke is generally not done. Usually, jokers can express risky ideas without directly being held responsible. Criticism expressed in a joking manner is also more difficult to refute by rational arguments. Furthermore, as jokes invite to laugh *with* one another, humor appeals to all-human feelings, and in this way, it can lower political barriers.¹ At the same time, humor bolsters up community building and brings about a sense of belonging together, as sharing humor creates a bond. In tense political confrontations, jokes can also lower stress and reduce fear. In addition, humorous protest usually attracts considerable media coverage, which may lead to wider political support and improved resource mobilization.

Typical devices of humor are jokes, cartoons, humorous chants, absurd theater, carnival-like festivities. Another humorous device with a long tradition is the parody and satire. All too often, authorities faced difficulties in punishing the authors and publishers, as parodies and satires are never explicitly clear about the object of their wit, even though the butt is often unmistakable to the public at large.²

Humor can attract large audiences, but there are limits, as humor is always strongly context-bound. In fact, most jokes are contained along social, ethnic, or gendered lines.³ Jokes, then, can bring people together, but they can also shock, hurt, and exclude. In order for humor to be successful in bringing down existing barriers, the joker should be able to play with the codes of more than one world.⁴

Role in Protest Cultures

In particular a number of new social movements have learned to appreciate these powers of humor. In the 1960s, the reinvention of Marxism coincided with an emerging youth subculture (happenings) next to an already existing subversive tradition in the arts. Formats of the absurd theater transformed into a new repertoire of protesters in among, above all, the student and peace movements. Their comical performances and funny chants surprised the authorities and attracted an enormous audience. Once arrested, the protesters could continue to mock the state institutions. In the late 1960s, the German student movement exploited the court proceedings in ridiculing the absurdity of the state, combining radical criticism with theatrical devices again.⁵

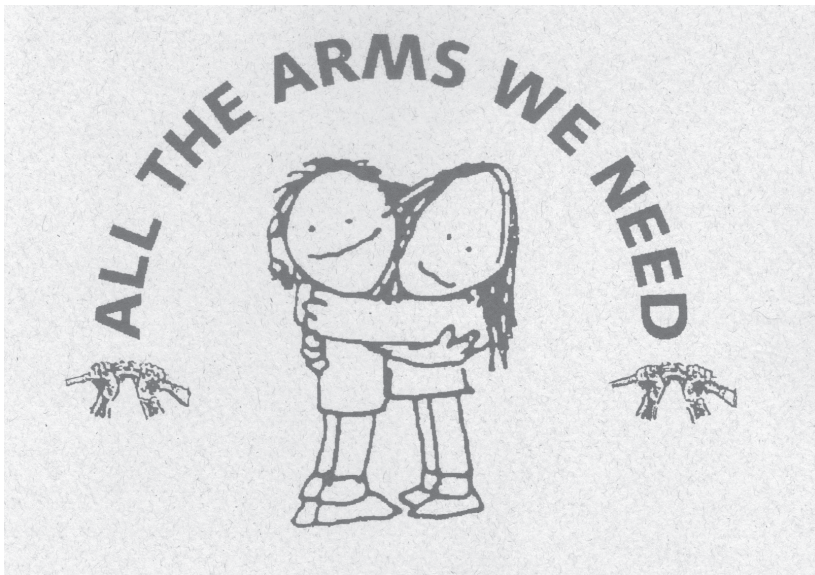


Figure 19.1. Postcard from the Dutch Peace Movement, 2004.
© De Brandnetel/Omslag.



Figure 19.2. Army of clowns at the main gate of the Büchel air base. Photographed, uploaded to Wikimedia Commons, and released into the public domain by Buroll.

What was new in these decades was the application of humor in an age in which media coverage was fast and widespread, in an age in which having sense of humor had come to be regarded as a virtue, and not least also among the higher classes in the Western world.⁶ The playful performances of the new social movements were to some degree an innovation in protest culture, in particular the emphasis on the absurdity of the state. Yet much of the actual humorous repertoire itself was not new.

Carnival-like festivities in the past had offered room for comparable social protest before. During carnivals, for example, former ranks and hierarchies disappeared, and familiar contacts were allowed between different social groups and classes. The articulation of the idiomatic “world turned upside down” in parades was a funny and subversive way to play with established rules and hierarchies.⁷

A similar ritualized setting that allowed for political criticism in a funny way was the jester in a royal court. Like the participants in carnivals, he did not have to fear punishment, as his peculiar position carried immunity.⁸ Somewhat comparable to the jester are the present-day cartoonists and other professional joke-makers. They can freely express themselves as long as they

remain within strict boundaries: the context of a newspaper or the confines of a theater performance. Cartoons prove extremely valuable, as they can reach numerous uneducated and semi-literate sections of the population. Cartoons can also foster a shared identity among the uprooted, by recognizing their hardships and complaints, and transforming these into political demands.⁹ Their criticism becomes problematic once they step outside these boundaries, when for example cartoons are deliberately reprinted outside their context or when jokes are retold in front of a different public. The controversy around the Muhammad cartoons serves as a perfect example.¹⁰

For several of the more recent, left-wing, autonomous groups in Western Europe, humor forms part and parcel of their sphere and is central to their alternative political identity. For them, humor not only is a way of framing protest, but is in itself a protest against the existing establishment, which is viewed as vertical, petrified, closed, and humorless. By their playful acts, they want to show they belong to a different world, one that is horizontal, human, and open.¹¹

Several of these more recent protest movements use the devices of former carnival, with their painted faces, masks, or costumes. Most outspoken in this regard are the parades of the gay and lesbian movement. Although always joyful events, the participants nevertheless criticize the typical heterosexual norms, using humorous inversions of gendered roles.¹²

Laughing together forms a bond, as sharing emotions in general does. But humor in itself does not create a collective identity. Certainly, it may give a playful twist to that identity, but the political aims of a movement must be clear in order to be able to bring a humorous message in a successful way, with political effect. Gays and lesbians hold parades to bolster up their feeling of community, but the movement already enjoyed a certain collective identity.

Good examples of political jokes that are not necessarily linked to a political movement are the jokes circulating in some authoritarian regimes. Perhaps no other country harbored so many anticommunist jokes as the Soviet Union, yet in themselves they were no sign or proof of existing or rising opposition. Such jokes may well boost up morale and break down isolation, but the laughter remain isolated events as long as no existing movement will reap it in a political follow-up.¹³

Much of the social protest is not only aimed against the opponent, also the audience is important. The response from the public varies strongly, depending also upon the kind of humor used. Research has showed that in political debates, self-deprecating humor is best appreciated, whereas vicious and insulting humor is usually less valued, regardless of the political persuasion of the onlookers.¹⁴ A political movement that has been extremely

successful in using self-deprecating humor are the Mexican Zapatistas, in no small respect thanks to Marcos's specific use of humor.¹⁵

To conclude, life is full of incongruities and contradictions. Social protest is a natural reaction to them. Humor typically thrives thanks to those incongruities and contradictions. Most of the existing social protest is deadly serious, and it should be. But if applied in a heedful way, humor can bring energy to social movements, make it fun to be involved, draw in new members, attract usually more media coverage, and thus well serve the serious causes of social protest in the end again.

Research Perspectives and Open Questions

While the impact of humor in protest movements and its possible contribution to their resilience or success is a rather understudied phenomenon in general, a number of issues deserve attention here. Strongly underrepresented are studies on the role of humor in non-Western protest movements.¹⁶ The expansion of the Internet facilitates the spread of protest methods, also the humorous ones. In the Arab Spring of 2011, for example, members of the Egyptian 6 April Youth Movement learned from Serbian activists how to attack authorities and police forces in a funny, disarming way.¹⁷ How such templates of action can be shared across different cultures and continents, despite the fact that humor is usually strongly context-bound, is an open question. Finally, also the role of gender needs more attention. The long established myth that women have no sense of humor has been fostered by the male-dominated discourse and by the fact that women often laugh about different things than men. Yet, in all-women organizations, humor serves likewise to counteract authorities and other critics of the movement.¹⁸

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Notes

1. Christie Davies, *Jokes and Their Relation to Society* (Berlin, 1998), 176; Alexander Rose, "When Politics Is a Laughing Matter," *Policy Review* 59 (2001–2): 59–71.
2. MM Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 452–54; Anton C Zijderfeld, "Jokes and Their Relation to Social Reality," *Social Research* 35 (1968): 286–311; for an example John Reed, *Snowball's Chance. A Novel* (New York, 2002).
3. Giseline Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke* (Berlin, 2006); Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, "Over the Edge? Subversive Humour between Colleagues and Friends," *Humor* 15 (2002): 65–87; Barbara Plester and Mark Orams, "Send in the Clowns: The Role of the Joker in Three New Zealand IT Companies," *Humor* 21 (2008): 253–81.
4. See for example Nancy Levi Arnez and Clara B Anthony, "Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire," *Phylon* 29 (1968): 339–46.
5. M Lane Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (2005): 136–55; Simon Teune, "Humour as a Guerilla Tactic: The West German Student Movement's Mockery of the Establishment," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 115–32; Jörgen Johansen, "Humor as a Political Force, or How to Open the Eyes of Ordinary People in Social Democratic Countries," *Philosophy and Social Action* 17, no. 3 and 4 (1991): 23–29.
6. Rod A Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA, 2007), 24.
7. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), 187–204; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans* (New York, 1979).
8. Anton Zijderfeld, *Reality in a Looking Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly* (London, 1982), 207. Compare the immunity position of the joker in various societies in Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man* 3 (1968): 361–76.
9. Michael Cohen, "'Cartooning Capitalism': Radical Cartooning and the Making of American Popular Radicalism in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 35–58; Nicola Pizzolato, "Revolution in a Comic Strip: Gasparazzo and the Identity of Southern Migrants in Turin, 1969–1975," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 59–76.
10. P Lewis, ed., "The Muhammad Cartoons and Humor Research: A Collection of Essays," *Humor* 21 (2008): 1–46, with contributions by Christie Davies, Giseline Kuipers, Paul Lewis, Rod A Martin, Elliott Oring, and Victor Raskin.
11. Sorensen, "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression," 176; Cristina Flesher Fominaya, "The Role of Humour in the Process of Collective Identity Formation in Autonomous Social Movement Groups in Contemporary Madrid," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 243–58; Patrick Gun Cuninghame, "'A Laughter That Will Bury You All': Irony as Protest and Language as Struggle in the Italian 1977 Movement," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 153–86.

12. Anna Lundbergh, "Queering Laughter in the Stockholm Pride Parade," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 169–87.
13. Christie Davies, "Humour and Protest: Jokes Under Communism," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 291–305; Kathleen Stokker, "Quisling Humor in Hitler's Norway: Its Wartime Function and Postwar Legacy," *Humor* 14 (2001): 339–57.
14. Amy Bippus, "Factors Predicting the Perceived Effectiveness of Politicians' Use of Humor during a Debate," *Humor* 20 (2007): 105–21.
15. Thomas Olesen, "The Funny Side of Globalization: Humour and Humanity in Zapatista Framing," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 21–34.
16. See for example Oscar Verkaaik, "Fun and Violence: Ethnocide and the Effervescence of Collective Aggression," *Social Anthropology* 11 (2003): 3–22.
17. Valentine M Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement* (2nd ed., Plymouth, 2012).
18. Krista Cowman, "Doing Something Silly: The Uses of Humour by the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903–1914," in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. M 't Hart and D Bos (Cambridge, 2007), 259–74; Janet Bing, "Liberated Jokes: Sexual Humor in All-Female Groups," *Humor* 20 (2007): 337–66.

Recommended Reading

- Bruner, M Lane. "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (2005): 136–55. This discusses recent humorous protest movements.
- Kuipers, Giseline. *Good Humor, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke*. Berlin, 2006. Explains the limits of jokes because of different social and cultural contexts.
- Sorensen, Majken Jul. "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression." *Peace & Change* 33 (2008): 167–90. Offers an excellent example of the power of humor in social protest.
- 't Hart, Marjolein, and Dennis Bos, ed. *Humour and Social Protest*. Cambridge, 2007. Contains contributions on the role of humor in protest movements from the early modern period to the present day with a helpful introduction by 't Hart.